Doubters Welcome
October 16, 2011

John Buchanan, Pastor
Fourth Presbyterian Church

Psalm 96
Mark 9:14–29

“I believe; help my unbelief!”
Mark 9:24 (NRSV)

Be patient toward all that is
unsolved in your heart and try to
love the questions themselves. . . .
You will live into the answers.

Rainer Maria Rilke
Letters to a Young Poet

We come to church out of lives crowded with activity, schedules tight, obligations, appointments, responsibilities. Slow us down. Silence in us any voice but yours, and startle us with your truth, your healing love, your grace in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

What is your favorite Bible verse?

> The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
>
> Behold, I am doing a new thing; do you not perceive it?
>
> If I take the wings of the morning, and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall hold me fast.
>
> Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.
>
> While he was still far off, his father saw him and ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.
>
> He is not here: he is risen.

> Nothing in all of creation shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.
>
> Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

Those are a few of my favorites. But high on the list, maybe at the head of the list, is “I believe; help my unbelief!” I think that may be one of the most important, most meaningful sentences in the Bible, certainly one of the most relevant for people who live in this bewildering, amazing time of ours when traditional religious beliefs seem to be challenged on all sides, from sophisticated intellectuals espousing a new atheism to fundamentalist preachers embarrassing the rest of us with their outlandish pronouncements about what God is up to in the world. “I believe; help my unbelief” is an important idea.

It is also one of my favorite stories. I have always identified with the man in this story since that day long ago that the most astonishing thing happened to me: I became a father and discovered, among other things, that I didn’t know a thing about babies, hadn’t the foggiest notion of how to hold a baby, change a baby, bathe a baby. In addition to all of that, I discovered a profound game change, a love I didn’t even know was in my heart and a sense of responsibility: this little thing was now absolutely, utterly dependent on me and, thanks be to God, another person, my partner in the project, who did know a great deal about how to do this.

Parents know the wisdom of the old adage that “you are only as happy as your least happy child.”

So I know this father who brings his son to Jesus. When your child hurts, you hurt. When your child is disappointed, so are you. When your child is heartbroken, your heart breaks too. And when one day you have to turn your child over to surgeons and nurses and watch as she or he is wheeled into the operating room, that is about as empty and powerless and vulnerable as it gets. So I know this man.

A crowd, as always, has been following Jesus. In the crowd is a father and his young son. He is not there for spiritual advice. He hasn’t brought his son to have his soul saved. He’s there because he is desperate. He has told his story to Jesus’ disciples to no avail, so he has pushed his way through the

crowd, pulling the little boy behind him until they find Jesus. The story pours out, in clinical detail. “My son has an evil spirit. When it seizes him, it knocks him down, shaking all over, grinding his teeth, foaming at the mouth.”

“Bring him to me,” Jesus says, and it happens right there, in front of Jesus. The little boy falls to the ground, rolls around, foaming at the mouth.

Jesus asks a diagnostic question, the very question physicians begin with: “How long has this been going on?” “Since childhood. Sometimes he has fallen into the fire and into water.”

“If you are able, have pity on us and help us.” Notice, that’s not exactly a ringing affirmation. “If you are able”—that’s an expression of skepticism born of a thousand failures. This man has tried everything, consulted with physicians, faith healers, gone everywhere there was an ounce of hope that someone might help his son. “If you are able, have pity on us and help us.”

Jesus’ response makes me uncomfortable. In fact, it sounds a little judgmental: “If you are able! All things are possible for the one who believes.” Is the implication that the boy has not been healed because his father doesn’t believe enough, that it’s his fault? Or is Jesus the one who believes and in whom all things are possible?

In either event, this very vulnerable father cries out, “I believe.” And the sense of it, I think, is, “All right! All right! I believe then. I’ll say whatever you want me to say if it will help my son. I believe.” And then a moment of pure, beautiful human integrity, “help my unbelief.”

It is not possible to explain how it happened. Everyone in the ancient world believed that evil spirits caused illness. And in our world we know a little bit about psychosomatic symptoms and how healing is always something of a miracle and mystery.

Jesus commanded the spirit to come out of him. The boy is still in the throes of what sounds like an epileptic episode, and now he’s absolutely still. Jesus takes him by the hand and lifts him up, brushes him off, pats him on the shoulder, and the text doesn’t say it but I know he falls into his father’s arms, tears streaming down the father’s face, and off they go, home, to a new and hopeful future in which everything now is possible.

A careful reading shows an internal contradiction. Jesus says first that healing the boy requires strong belief.

The man affirms his belief—sort of—and he acknowledges his unbelief.

Jesus heals his son anyhow. John Calvin, careful, almost tedious scholar that he was, observed about "I believe; help my unbelief" that "these two statements may appear to contradict each other, but there is none of us that does not experience both of them in himself" (see William Placher, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible—Mark,* p.132).

Really? John Calvin? Both belief and unbelief existing in all of us, even in himself? Self-confident, dogmatic old Calvin? Belief and unbelief?

Somewhere we got the idea that belief means no unbelief, that having a religion means having no unanswered questions, that faith means having no doubts at all. Religious certainty has caused a lot of tragedy in human history. If you have no doubts about the absolute truth of your religion, no unanswered questions, it seems logical to define someone who differs, who adheres to another religion, as somehow an infidel, an enemy. Thinking like that leads to the conclusion that it is a good thing to rid the world of the other, the infidel, the heretic, to cleanse society by eliminating the doubters. Thinking like that motivates young men to strap explosives to their bodies and blow themselves up in a busy market place.

And when that profound certainty creeps into politics, when ideological correctness is the sole criterion by which everything is evaluated and decided, civil political discourse ends, and the goal is to prove the other wrong at all costs; the ultimate overriding goal is to defeat the other party or candidate in the next election, regardless of the impact on the country and the economy.

But apparently Jesus can handle a little unbelief. In fact there are some very good things to be said about doubt and uncertainty. The distinguished psychiatrist and philosopher Rollo May said, "The most creative people neither ignore doubt nor are paralyzed by it. They admit it, explore it, and act in spite of it" (*The Courage to Create,* cited by William Sloane Coffin in *The Courage To Love*).

There would be no advances in science and technology if there were not courageous people willing to risk ridicule and embarrassing failure by doubting conventional wisdom. Steve Jobs' genius was precisely his willingness to doubt the given in favor of the possible. Without honest, creative doubt, no one would ever have injected a lethal virus into a healthy person's arm on the hope that it would immunize him/her from smallpox, measles, polio. Without courageous doubt of conventional wisdom, no surgeon would ever have operated on an open and exposed human heart.

The great theologians have understood that faith and doubt are not at all incompatible. In fact, honest faith includes honest doubt. The great Paul Tillich said, "If doubt appears, it should not be considered as the negation of faith, but as an element which was always and will always be present in the act of faith" (*The Dynamics of Faith,* p. 15).

Søren Kierkegaard, nineteenth-century Danish philosopher whom philosophy majors are still reading and trying to understand, helped many of us with his concept of "the leap of faith." Your intellect, your reason, will take you only so far, Kierkegaard said. You will never, so long as you are alive and honest, eliminate every doubt. Finally you must leap into the darkness—make "the leap of faith."

The last book William Sloane Coffin wrote before he died was *Letters to a Young Doubter.* Coffin loved and frequently quoted German poet Rainer Maria Rilke who wrote in the book *Letters to a Young Poet,* "Be patient towards all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. . . . You will live into the answers."

When his young correspondent expresses his doubts about Christian faith, Coffin responds, "Don't be anxious about your newfound doubts. Doubts move you forward not backward. . . . In my experience, a religious faith despite doubts is far stronger than one without doubts. I suspect that no one so reveals an absence of faith as a dogmatist."

I suspect that everyone has doubts. When life strikes a particularly cruel blow, no one is immune to doubting the presence of a good and loving God. No one who has witnessed innocent suffering has not, in some way or another, lodged a complaint with heaven and asked – simply, profoundly "Why?".

John Claypool was a progressive Southern Baptist who became an Episcopal priest, and a popular preacher, author, leader. And then his daughter, eight year old Laura Lue, was diagnosed with acute and deadly leukemia. Devastated, Claypool struggled and suffered as any parent would and afterward wrote a very helpful book about the whole experience, Tracks of a Fellow Sufferer.

Claypool describes how, as a minister and priest, he had walked with many people through the Valley of the Shadow of Death over the years. And now he found himself asking the same question they all asked: "Why?"

After his daughter's death Claypool concluded that the only answer to "Why?" is not an answer but a realization, a confession that every life is a gift that was not deserved or earned, but a pure gift of God's grace.

Along the way, however, he wrote some wise words about doubt. He said that it was important to question God: "There is more honest faith in an act of questioning than in the act of silent submission." Questioning God is, itself, an act of faith. "I believe: help my unbelief" is an honest confession, a prayer, and an expression of ultimate hope.

In the middle of his grief, Claypool went to visit his friend, Carlyle Marney, a wise counselor to many troubled and hurting people including clergy. Marney himself was sick and would die just a few days after Claypool's visit. Claypool explained that he was distressed that he couldn't help asking "Why?" Marney admitted that he had no word for the suffering of the innocent and never had. "But," he said, "I fall back on the notion that God has a lot of explaining to do." [This material is from Thomas Long's book, What Shall we Say? Evil, Suffering and the Crisis of Faith, to be published soon by Westminster/John Knox Press]

There is a God to complain to, to argue with; there is a God to question and doubt… "I believe: help my unbelief."

The marvel is that the father didn't really have much to bring to Jesus: his partial, flimsy faith: his concoction of belief and unbelief, his vacillation between a grateful faith one day and the next day, nothing. All he had to bring to Jesus was the deepest, most powerful and holiest thing in his life – his love for his son – and it was enough.

Somehow the word got around that if you have doubts you need to get them resolved before you go to church. Somehow the word got around that if you have honest doubts about the truth of the Gospel, the relevance of Christianity, the existence of God even, you don't belong in a church. Nothing could be further from the truth. If you're standing outside because you're not sure what you believe – come on in. There are plenty inside like you. If you have serious questions, bring them to church. You'll meet plenty of people who have the same questions. And you will find a place where the questions are taken seriously: where people agree to consider them, talk about them, maybe even argue about them – and finally, in our life together, bring them, to Jesus.

One of my mentors over the years has been Douglas John Hall: Professor of Theology at McGill University in Quebec, now retired. Faith, Hall wrote, is not having no doubts but "trusting God in spite of our doubts." "There is no more important responsibility for the minister," Hall suggested, "than to say, with regularity from the pulpit: 'Doubters welcome here.'"

The marvel of this little story, and the good news is that while the father didn't have much to bring, other than his love for his son, it was enough.

That is what Jesus Christ means…

You don't have to have it all figured out.

You don't have to be morally perfect.

You don't have to have faith like the Rock of Gibraltar.

You can bring what you have – your questions, your doubts, your fears, your hopes and dreams, and your deepest, holiest love.

It will be enough.

I have returned to this story several times over the years, and each time I have turned to an old revival hymn we don't sing much anymore, but a hymn that seems to me the right and best and maybe the only way to end this:

Just as I am
though tossed about
With many a conflict, many a doubt.
Fightings and fears, within, without
O Lamb of God, I come.
I come!

Amen.